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ABSTRACT

Popular literature consists of novels, stories, and essays--and by extension, plays, movies, and teledramas--that attract a significant audience. Having students study popular fiction in English classes can help to "hook" the non-reader because popular fiction is more accessible and simpler in structure and language than the literary classics. Students who develop analytic skills with popular texts can transfer the skills to more complex texts, such as the literary classics, and become motivated to study more of the classics. Popular fiction may be used in literature classes by combining both popular fiction and literary classics while studying one theme, genre, or time period, showing how all types of literature reflect the social interests of the times. (RL)

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THE MUSE AND THE MASSES: POPULAR FICTION IN LITERATURE CLASSES

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A colleague of mine had, some four or five years ago, worked into his syllabus for an introductory literature course a system for raising the level of aesthetic consciousness among his students. Along with A Farewell to Arms, which he had used in the course the previous year, he decided to teach Love Story. He developed a set of interesting parallels between the two novels, leading to the climactic similarity: the death of the heroines. He anticipated that a discussion of such parallels would soon lead his class to a proper contempt for the Segal novel and an equally proper admiration for the work of Hemingway.

Alas! it did not turn out that way. The class, dutifully following the system of parallelism, was led to observe one not noted by the instructor: the stark sentimentality they perceived in both novels. Moreover, some of the more intransigeant among the class continued to prefer Love Story to A Farewell to Arms and no amount of learned discourse could dissuade them.

The preceding, while true, is a moral fable -- recounted here for the purpose of indicating how NOT to use popular fiction in literature classes. There is just no use attempting to prove to students that the books they really like are really junk -- at least not by open, or apparently open, discussions designed to demonstrate that, not

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comparisons, but popular fictions, are odious. However, as you shall see, that very good advice is not so easy to follow.

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My interest in popular literature has its own history. Like most students of English literature I was trained as a New Critic, an explicator par excellence, and (although a closet mystery-novel-reader) a teacher of the classics of American literature. However, as life went on, it struck me as more and more inescapable that literature must somehow be connected with the world, society, the culture, and I began looking into some of these connections. That's not a particularly profound observation -- unless you were, as I was, a very well-trained New Critic.

As a result of that observation and the wide-eyed stare and "wild surmise" that followed it, I began to ask different kinds of questions about books. Up to then, questions were fairly well-restricted to "what does it mean?" and "how can you tell?" Not trivial questions, but questions deeply centered in the text itself. It now became interesting to ask questions about texts as documents -- how they related to their times and how they related to their audiences.

The first such question I asked myself was: What kinds of stories were written about the Civil War during the Civil War? I didn't know any; I didn't even know the titles of any, but eventually I discovered a forty-year-bibliography of magazine fiction about the Civil War. Reading the stories (some fifty of them), I discovered

very quickly that they were not precisely monuments of culture. On the other hand, I also found out very soon that they were a remarkable reflection of ideas and attitudes about all aspects of the war. Moreover, a good number of the stories appeared to be experiments -- albeit not altogether successful -- in new fictional techniques, techniques that would one day come together under the rubric: Realism.

The point of all this is that I found myself deep in the files of old magazines, reading materials I had never before heard of, and discovering that one could indeed ask those new questions about a body of literature. That heady experience has led me on to a study of popular attitudes toward the house and home in American culture, a biography (in-progress) of a major popular writer of the first half of this century, and -- at present -- in a nice circularity, to research into American popular attitudes about World War I, especially as they are reflected in fiction contemporary with the war.

My own research is not the subject for this paper; however, the teaching I have done in popular fiction has all come out of that research and, more generally, out of the new ways in which I have come to look at literature as a result of that research. Simply put, I look at literature as a manifestation of culture, as one of a set of ways in which a society expresses itself. To understand the society (and the literature) adequately, it is important to know not only the best literary productions of a time or place, but the whole range of printed writing that people paid to read.

Sometime in any discussion like this it is necessary to ask and to try to answer the question: What is popular literature? I can provide only a pragmatic definition -- one that works for me. Popular literature consists of novels and stories and essays -- and by extension, plays, and movies, and teledramas -- that attract a significant audience. The category includes Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain, and The Mary Tyler Moore Show. That King Lear is better than any episode of The Mary Tyler Moore Show is true but irrelevant to the definition. By the same token there are a couple of World War I novels that are much better than Faulkner's Soldiers' Pay; however, since the authors did not achieve lasting fame, their novels are out of print. There are aesthetic standards, but they do not necessarily help us separate popular from elite literature.

Fortunately for me -- at least for me in my pragmatic moods -- it is not necessary to make that separation. What I have learned about teaching popular literature is to teach it mixed in with the rest of the literature conventionally taught in a particular course. If my thesis is that literature reflects society, then it is no more sensible to teach only popular literature than it is to teach no popular literature. That was another lesson I had to learn the hard way.

Teaching popular literature, however, serves more than a particular theoretical end -- in the study of culture; it also serves some very practical ends for English teachers. Before I turn to some examples of the use of popular fiction in English classes, let me mention these practical ends. First, if carefully used, popular

fiction in English courses can help to "hook" the non-reader. More accessible, simpler in structure and language, and often with a more direct appeal through plot, such books can help the non-reader discover the pleasures of the book. The same qualities -- essentially the lower level of complexity and subtlety -- serve to make popular literature easier to analyze. Students who develop analytic skills with popular texts can transfer the skills to more complex texts. Another characteristic of popular fiction is a more obvious manipulation of formulas and stereotypes than in elite fiction. Thus, students can perceive fairly easily those simpler structures of fiction that appear as formulas -- formulas, for example, about love and romance, or about good and evil. Similarly, for courses in ethnic and women's literature, stereotypes can be spotted and their attributes identified; those attributes can then be traced in more complicated works. That brings us right back to the relationship between literature and culture and one particularly significant function of popular literature, which is to demonstrate to our students that life and "fictions" are not disjunct, that books are not alien and remote from them.

So far I have been talking about <u>why</u> it is useful to include popular literature in your classes. I'd like now to turn to <u>how</u> to use popular literature in your classes, and the best way for me to do that is to turn to examples, some from my own experience, others for the sake of argument. To start, consider a conventional survey of American literature. Let's assume that one of the texts is <u>The Scarlet Letter</u> (not an unusual assumption), but let's also assume (much less usually) that another is <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin</u>, which was,

after all, the most popular book of its time -- at least north of Nashville.

Since typical student response to The Scarlet Letter ranges from boredom to hostility, it is at least worth arguing that they'll prefer Uncle Tom's Cabin, although they are very likely to observe not only that the plot is a little more compelling but that the story is a good deal cornier than Hawthorne's. In fact, they might object strongly to the sentimentality in Stowe's book. Fine. It is sentimental. And that gives you a good opportunity to ask your students two questions: 1) What strikes them as most offensively sentimental (particular characters? specific incidents? the happy ending?) and 2) Are there any examples of similar sentimentality (in character or situation) in the fiction presented in our contemporary world? Television is a treasure-chest of sentiment and you can help students see that the same things that made Stowe popular over a century ago make certain teledramas popular today. Apparently, sentimentality fills some basic human needs; that's worth talking about.

Since Hawthorne and Stowe were not only contemporaries but were very much members of the same kind of society, their books bear comparison -- not to prove that Hawthorne is better, but to demonstrate the pervasiveness of ideas throughout that society. A comparison of Simon Legree and Roger Chillingsworth may begin with simple descriptions of character, but it should soon turn to discussions of villainy and even of the concept of evil. Hawthorne's mysterious Pearl, surely one of the most enigmatic characters in American fiction, receives some illumination when she is discussed as

an example of "the child," and when you can include Little Eva and Topsy as other examples of the child as a type in nineteenth century fiction. Why, after all, are all three little girls? In short, one of the side-effects of teaching Uncle Tom's Cabin is that it will help students deal more effectively with The Scarlet Letter.

In my own teaching, I often do a course on American literature from 1870 to 1910. Recently, I have added to a reading list composed of writers like Howells, Dreiser, London, Crane, and James, the unlikely name of Horatio Alger. The principal theme in my course is success and money, particularly the paradoxical way in which Americans respond to success and wealth, at once decrying them as false values and worshipping those who achieve them. The question is a complicated one and the books assigned for the course -- from A Hazard of New Fortunes to Sister Carries and Martin Eden -- are themselves complicated. A carefully administered dose of Ragged Dick and Mark, the Match Boy takes the students a long way toward unraveling those complications.

But the first problem I encounter with Alger is the response of the students to the very idea of reading Ragged Dick and then the even more preposterous notion of discussing it seriously. Well, they are mostly English majors and they can be terrible intellectual snobs. Unfortunately, their analytical skills are not necessarily up to their intellectual aspirations and I have discovered that a carefully guided analysis of Ragged Dick sharpens those skills considerably. Moreover, weaker students who spend most of the time in class staring fixedly at their books, assuming that no teacher could call on anyone so deeply

and seriously engrossed, discover to their surprise and delight that they can analyze literature. What has happened to them is that, for the first time in their academic lives, they feel superior to the text. Accustomed to a position of cowed humility, they gain enormous confidence by dealing successfully with the admittedly supine form of an Alger novel.

So, we go through the entire battery of "English-course" questions: plot, characters, setting, point of view, tone, diction, and symbols. And we go on to isolate the author's attitudes, the games he is playing behind the manipulations of the story. When students find out that behind the success story Alger presents are cautions, hedgings, limitations, when they learn that Dick will not be President (even -- or especially -- that he will not be president of a bank) but only a modest, clerk-ish success, they've begun to understand important aspects of the paradoxical attitude toward success in American culture. And when they go on to see that even that modest success requires significant sacrifices from Dick (of his wit, his independence, even of his own language), they are adequately prepared to deal with the novels that follow -- prepared to feel a shock of recognition when Jack London's Martin Eden echoes Ragged Dick in his purchase of a suit, a toothbrush and a comb, and even prepared to discover the fundamental irony in Sister Carrie's unconventional rise to success. And as in all such work, students can be encouraged to bring to class their own recognitions of contemporary echoes of popular culture and myth. They will find Alger-like characters on television. A student might even note and comment on the fact that nowadays most Alger-like boys on television seem to be Black c.

Spanish-speaking Americans.

One other comment on a survey or period course. For graduate students in the summer of 1976, I prepared a course in contemporary narrative. We were to cover five or ten years and to look for themes, attitudes, types. I chose examples of fiction and non-fiction and tried to cover the range from elite to mass literature. As my example of mass literature (at the lowest end of my personal values-system) I chose Watership Down. I was sure that my students would find it as offensively silly, sentimental and phony as I did. Like my colleague with Love Story, I tripped over my own presumptions. Some of my students found a good deal to admire in the book and there I was, falling into the primary error of popular literature teaching: arguing against the validity of the text, and worse, asserting my aesthetic standards as inviolable cultural norms.

While I am in a confessional frame of mind, I might as well talk about another difficulty I got myself into teaching popular literature. Once again, the trouble stemmed from ignoring my own good advice, in this case, the advice against teaching only popular literature. I planned a course on a popular genre, the mystery novel, and by the nature of the enterprise, I was trapped in a world constructed entirely of popular fiction.

The essential difficulty I had with the course came from the expectations of the students. The very title of the course ("The History of Mystery," I blush to recall) assured them that there would be nothing whatever demanded of them; somewhat mysteriously, many seemed to expect to do no reading. It was a severely demoralized and

even sullen group who met twice a week to discuss formal structures, character stereotypes, and the moral vision of Rinehart, Sayres, Christie, the two MacDonalds and others. Colleagues of mine have had similar difficulties. Science Fiction differed only in the percentage of engineers in the course. Mystics and Visionary Poets, a course that started with St. Augustine! attracted every casual Zen Buddhist on campus, at least every indolent Zen Buddhist. The problem would seem to be insurmountable, but I have considered trying my mystery course one more time, advertising it with the reading list appended. The list will start with Oedipus Rex and go right on to Hamlet. In other words, it is best to mix popular literature with other materials.

Currently, I am teaching a course that mixes elite and popular literature in a somewhat different framework. The course focuses on a particular event rather than on a period or a theme, in this case, on the First World War. Essentially the course falls into two parts. The second half is the more conventinal; students read well-known novels about the war (Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos) written in the 1920's and 1930's. But during the first half, we are working at learning how Americans felt about the war from 1914 to 1918, and in order to do so, we have turned to popular literature. Some materials have been placed in the library on reserve. But the greater part of the information is coming from the students, each of whom is assigned a popular novel written during this period. Student reports make it possible to share the material.

Two things deserve mention in this context. First, the popular fiction is serving us admirably. The books provide us with an index of shifting attitudes, from neutrality to belligerancy. Those attitudes are apparent not only in the expository material of the novels but, as the students discover and explain in their reports, in the plot structures, the character types, the conception of crisis and climax and resolution. Students have reached, I would say, a remarkable level of sophistication when they can relate elements of formal structure to aspects of meaning.

The second point is much less abstract. As you learn in trying to add popular materials to literature courses, it is difficult and often frustrating to get hold of the kinds of books you need. If you concentrate on contemporary literature, as I did in my graduate course, there is no difficulty. In any other case, I can only recommend my approach: order twice as many books as you plan to use; if you are lucky, you will receive enough to carry your course. Even the mystery novel, where I anticipated no problems, turned out to be a nightmare of cancellations, reorders, second choices -- going right on through March of the spring semester. For older periods, the nineteenth century or the earlier part of the twentieth, there are only a few possible solutions. You can stick to the reprinted popular classic, like Uncle Tom's Cabin. You can wait around for a publisher's sale and buy enough copies of the books you want to sell them to your class. I've done that myself, but it only worked for one course because the students wanted to keep the books. Finally, you can do what I am doing in my World War I course: simply assign books available in local libraries and rely on individual student reports.

Texts present the most pressing practical difficulty in teaching popular literature. But the most serious problem lies elsewhere; it lies in academic elitism as it pervades both faculty and student-body. Even those students who enroll in a course in the mystery novel or science fiction -- and then do no work -- are demonstrating a brand of elitism. And even students who hate English, always have and always will, expect only the best from the culture of the west to be presented in those hateful classes. You can combat this only by the kind of class room work with the texts that I have been discussing. Your seriousness and the students' discovery of the fruitfulness of popular materials eventually make their point.

Then there is faculty elitism, and that is another issue altogether. I am entirely sympathetic with the point of view that tries to preserve the masterpieces of culture; however, I am not sure that locking the gates of the tower against popular culture will do the trick. I do, though, understand those in our profession who, seeing "ignorant armies clash by night," have decided to "be true To one another!" As Dover Beach turns into Dunkirk, I look for rescue in the form of relating literature once again to life, specifically to the culture out of which it was born. Others in the profession argue strongly against that position. It is not very long after all, since a great poet told us that "Poetry makes nothing happen," and since a significant and much-anthologized work insisted that "A poem should not mean but be."

Popular literature has a place in the English classroom not only because it can help us teach and help the students learn, but because significant literature has, at least until the last hundred years, always been popular, always appealed to its audience. Through teaching popular literature, not in itself nor by itself, but as one part of our literature courses -- we can show our students that literature *is* tied to life. In our complex world, popular literature may disappoint us by demonstrating its connections to life primarily through the simple manipulation of formulas and stereotypes. Nevertheless, they are the formulas and stereotypes that occupy the popular imagination and our students can be brought to recognize them, and then to cope with them. One thing I am very sure of: students who cannot see the connections between life and fiction in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will never see them in *The Scarlet Letter* and, for them, *The Scarlet Letter* will remain less a cultural monument than a lifeless artifact.